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SUBJECT: TENUOUS ALLIANCES ON MADAGASCAR'S EAST COAST

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR NIELS MARQUARDT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: This is the first of two cables focusing on the east-coast opposition stronghold of Tamatave; this installment covers the city's political and ethnic dynamics, and the region's influence on national politics. For Tamatave's numerous opposition leaders, the current political crisis is but the latest episode in an 8-year struggle against President Ravalomanana and his party, TIM. While they uniformly recognize opposition leader Andry Rajoelina as indispensable to the process of unseating Ravalomanana (ironically, because of their shared Merina ethnicity), there is less agreement about his future role in national politics, although they are desperately short of alternatives. After suffering some of the worst violence outside of Antananarivo in late January, Tamatave has maintained a strained calm for the last two weeks. If Rajoelina falters in his push for a transition government and the departure of Ravalomanana, however, the Tamatave opposition is likely to break from his coalition, with increased potential for further violence in the region. END SUMMARY.

UNDER CONTROL, JUST

¶12. (SBU) Tamatave descended into violence on January 27, one day after rioting and arson broke out in Antananarivo (Tana).

As in the capital city, looters focused on assets of the president's company, Tiko, although they spilled over to other grocery stores and poorly guarded retailers elsewhere in the city. They made a move to loot the city's large port (stocked with Tiko goods), but prescient management had already ensured sufficient coverage by the military to deter them. Security forces were initially slow to respond elsewhere in town, but by midweek they had regained enough control to repel the last attempted looting on Thursday and Friday; there have been no significant outbursts of violence anywhere in the city since January 29. Tamatave remains under curfew at night, as both government and opposition warily eye their counterparts in Tana for the next move. While the security forces are keeping their distance, few doubt their willingness to stamp out further unrest should need arise.

¶13. (C) Mayor Gervais Rakotomanana (TIM) denies that there were any real riots in the first place, before admitting that he has been denying further opposition requests to assemble

almost daily. Following TIM party doctrine, his focus is on "development", and he made it clear that he had little time for the concerns of the city's disorganized opposition. After taking charge in 2007 after the arrest of former mayor Roland Ratsiraka, Rakotomanana quickly repaired the city's damaged relationship with the national government and got the funds flowing: in his short tenure so far, he has already repaired several major sections of city roads and other infrastructure, using funds which Ratsiraka's supporters say were blocked to his non-TIM administration. Supporters point to such investment as the result of presidential goodwill towards Madagascar's new "Economic Capital"; opposition leaders cynically dismiss it as a cheap distraction to buy support.

¶4. (C) This focus on development has paid dividends: in the December 2007 municipal elections, the TIM candidate lead with 48% of the vote - not a majority, but far more than second-place MTS (of Ratsiraka) won. The opposition alleges vote buying and ballot stuffing in favor of TIM, but an equally powerful force was the electorate's readiness for change. After six years in the political wilderness, thanks to the ongoing feud between former mayor Ratsiraka (in opposition from day one) and the national government, it had become clear that President Ravalomanana would not be the first to blink. The personal nature of this political rivalry came to a head during the 2006 presidential elections, in which Ratsiraka won only 10% of the vote to Ravalomanana's 54%; he was a losing horse, and his region may well have chosen to withdraw their bets in favor of the party with money and power: TIM. TIM's political success in the region is deceptive however, and most TIM politicians are derided as opportunistic "TIM Pasteques (Watermelons)": green (the color of TIM) on the outside, but red (of previously dominant AREMA, an MTS ally) on the inside - and ready to

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switch back if the political winds shift.

UNITED IN OPPOSITION...AND LITTLE ELSE

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¶5. (C) Politics in Tamatave are severely fractured; no party other than TIM can count more than about 25% electoral support, and most far less. As is true on the national level, the parties do not compete on platform or ideology, but rather on the strength and personality of their leaders. In their more honest moments, they recognize the impact this has had on their ability to compete with TIM both locally and nationally, but no party is prepared to discuss unity beyond backing Rajoelina's TGV movement in Tana, and even that only as far as a transitional government. Concerning their failure in the 2006 presidential election, the opposition's well-worn explanation describes their disunity as strategic: rather than backing a single candidate, the opposition pushed an "anyone but Ravalomanana" message, intended to ensure that no candidate got a majority of votes and thus forcing a second round - in which opposition parties that didn't make the cut would unite behind one candidate who would then defeat Ravalomanana. As it happened, Ravalomanana conveniently polled 54% in the first round - and the opposition has been stewing about it ever since. Rather than clarifying the need to unite, however, this experience hardened their conviction that Ravalomanana had cheated, and that the only way forward was their current mantra: an inclusive national conference, a transition government to rewrite the constitution and electoral code, and then new elections. Each passing election since 2001 has only confirmed their doubts about resolving their grievances within the legal framework or electoral system as it currently exists.

¶6. (C) There are currently nine political parties, associations, or movements that are active in Tamatave: TIM, MTS, RAM, AREMA, LEADER-Fanilo, RPSD, TAFA, CRN, and TGV. Five of those maintain a national presence (TIM,

LEADER-Fanilo, AREMA, RPSD, CRN), two exist in at least one other region (RAM, TGV), and the remaining two are generally limited to the Atsinanana region, of which Tamatave is the capital (MTS, TAFA). TGV (of opposition leader Andry Rajoelina) and CRN (organized by former president Albert Zafy) are broader umbrella groups that unite other parties, although TGV has fielded independent candidates under their banner in past elections (including a failed run for mayor of Tamatave in 2007). MTS is the strongest single opposition party in the region, but their take at the ballot box in recent years sums up the opposition's problems: after polling only 22% in the 2007 mayoral election and 10% in the 2006 presidential election, even their "lead" position hasn't translated into victory.

¶7. (C) Among the local players, Theogene Pilaka of the Rassemblement pour l'Avenir de Madagascar (RAM) commands a good deal more support than his party's electoral success would suggest. RAM was founded in 1998 by Jose Vianey, an ally of Didier Ratsiraka, and at its peak had around 30 mayors and 40 parliamentary deputies in several coastal regions. It was initially in the AREMA camp during the crisis of 2001/02, but withdrew from the conflict by February ¶2002. It has remained out of electoral politics ever since, but maintains extensive support among students and youth in Atsinanana, Diana (north coast), and Boeny (west coast) regions. Several sources indicated that RAM was key in organizing Tamatave's protests in late January; Pilaka assured Emboff that they are uniquely capable of doing so again.

¶8. (C) RAM is a member of both CRN and TGV, and their withdrawal from electoral politics gives them a certain objectivity in evaluating support for the other parties. According to Pilaka, the region's heavyweights are TIM, MTS, and AREMA, and although no reliable statistics are available, other sources back up his rough estimate of around 80% support in the region for Rajoelina's TGV movement (which includes MTS and AREMA). Support for Roland Ratsiraka, a native of Tamatave who has allied himself with Rajoelina and claims to represent Madagascar's eastern seaboard, is far weaker: very few of that pro-TGV 80% are pleased with his ascendancy within the movement. Dislike for Roland Ratsiraka is a consistent theme across the opposition in Tamatave, but few parties can name a plausible alternative. Pierrot

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Rajaonarivelo (former deputy prime minister and national secretary of AREMA under Didier Ratsiraka) is often mentioned, but he remains exiled in France since 2002 to avoid criminal charges in Madagascar. Representatives from AREMA and TGV explicitly support Rajoelina as the head of a future transitional government, while CRN remains studiously focused on a roundtable discussion to determine such things at a later date. LEADER-Fanilo and RPSD have little direct support in the region, but are seen as useful partners by MTS and TAFA. TAFA, headed by Jean-Loup Bardy, is the smallest party of them all, but they make up for it with the closest alliance to TGV.

¶10. (C) Bardy, at 40 years old, is perhaps the youngest and most calculating politician in Tamatave, despite starting with one of the smallest support bases. He has tied his success to that of TGV, and is working hard to build an opposition alliance similar to that of Rajoelina in Tana. His enthusiasm has helped him gather a list of 500 active supporters that he coordinates via nightly SMS broadcasts, and he's the driving force behind admittedly infrequent "coordination meetings" of opposition parties in Tamatave. His meetings feature attendance sheets, minutes, and frequent moderation; for his efforts, he is tolerated by the rest of the opposition "dinosaurs" - although his push for long-term strategy and party platforms doesn't always mesh well with those whose interests extend barely further than the removal of Ravalomanana from power. Even his support for unity, however, has its limits: after outlining how a coalition of

TAFA, TGV, and MTS alone could command 60% of the vote in Tamatave, he rejected the idea that such a coalition might be lead by Ratsiraka - despite the fact that MTS accounted for half of that 60%.

SHARP CURVES AHEAD

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¶11. (C) Opposition unity, clearly, is not in the cards. They have common grievances: rigged elections, no access to public media, the political and economic monopoly of TIM, discontent with the terms of the local Canadian mining operation, the December purchase of a USD 60 million presidential jet, and the much-criticized Daewoo land deal. Lacking a common long-term goal, however, most opposition leaders have been content to settle on a roadmap (which fortunately has much in common with what's currently being discussed in Tana): there must be a national roundtable, followed by a transition government, leading to fresh elections within 12 to 24 months. Different parties have different "non-negotiables", but most demand Ravalomanana's complete departure from power, equal representation for coastal ethnic groups in government positions, a return to greater budgetary and administrative autonomy for the 22 regions (or 6 former provinces), and equal access to state media.

¶12. (C) All uniformly recognize that Rajoelina has been indispensable to the opposition movement, not because he has any more legitimate grievances than they do, but because he is of the same ethnic group as President Ravalomanana. In their view, the only reason the current conflict has not degenerated into ethnic violence (as in 2002) is because the two leaders in Tana are both of Merina ethnicity. Rajoelina is able to keep the focus on human rights, media freedoms, and corruption, whereas a member of any coastal ethnic group (but especially a Betsimisaraka from Tamatave, the ethnic group of former President Didier Ratsiraka) would be immediately accused by the GOM of fanning tribal hatreds - with a corresponding backlash against the highland merina residing on the coast. The town maintains an uneasy balance between ethnic groups, which divide the town geographically and politically as well: AREMA, MTS, and RAM are based in the northern part of town where the Betsimisaraka dominate (around 40% of the population), TIM is most supported by ethnic Merina in economically developed east-central Tamatave (35%), and CRN dominates the south side, which is populated with "immigrants" to the city, mostly from southern Madagascar. Per several sources, riots generally start in the north, and this conflict has been no different despite repeated assurances that no politicians are pushing the ethnic angle. Yet.

¶13. (C) According to former Minister of Education Fulgence Fanony, now a prominent figure in CRN, "Ravalomanana has legality, but Rajoelina has legitimacy". While many share

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this sentiment, several made clear that his "legitimacy" does not necessarily translate into trust: if Rajoelina and Ravalomanana come to an agreement on their own without taking account of the coastal agenda, his ethnicity will shift instantly from advantage to weakness - in a phrase heard several times over a three-day visit to Tamatave, Rajoelina's entire movement will be seen as a "cinema des Merinas": a charade meant to dupe their coastal allies from the beginning.

COMMENT

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¶14. (C) COMMENT: The opposition in Tamatave has nothing to lose; with TIM in control of city, regional, and national governments, as well as the city's major economic interests (the city's port, Madagascar's largest, is run by a presidentially-appointed General Director), no opposition leaders see any value in returning to business as usual. For

them, this conflict is just the latest episode in an eight-year standoff, but many in the region are convinced that this will be the final act one way or another. While they have thus far fended off the specter of ethnic violence, no resident of Tamatave believes it to be far off stage should Rajoelina "abandon" his coastal allies.

¶115. (C) It is not clear that the opposition in Tamatave has any unity of purpose beyond dethroning Ravalomanana, nor that any leader there or in Tana can speak for the region should opportunity arise. While Zafy's CRN appears to have the broadest membership, Roland Ratsiraka continues to command the most solid block of the many minority opposition parties - while simultaneously repelling plausible allies who want nothing to do with him (or his still-divisive uncle, former president Didier Ratsiraka). Former AREMA leader Pierrot Rajaonarivelo is perhaps the single most popular politician in the region - except he's in exile, and his support may not hold up if he returns. (Rumors at the beginning of the current crisis that Pierrot was "waiting in Reunion" to return sent shivers up many spines in Tana, but so far have not panned out.) Certain members of the "ray aman-dreny" (elders), such as Fulgence Fanony of the CRN, may be the only local politicians capable of bridging the sizable divide between these parties.

¶116. (C) Tamatave's ethnic Betsimisaraka political leaders have noticed that Rajoelina has yet to appoint a Tamatavien to his cabinet, although he has at least chosen a coastal Prime Minister (Roindéfo Monja, of Tulear). To maintain what little unity the opposition has, the political process in Tana must keep moving forward. Rajoelina can count on their support only as long as he remains committed to a transition government that does not include President Ravalomanana, which may be more than he can promise. If he fails to do so, these quarrelsome parties will likely begin to see the conflict in ethnic terms, with dire consequences for the prospect of a peaceful resolution. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT